### U.S. Department of Labor Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives and Public/Private Ventures present

## Hard Work on Soft Skills: Six Strategies for Creating a "Culture of Work"

Issue-Based Call #3

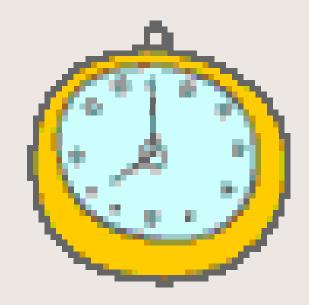
Friday, February 27, 2004 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Presented by Sam Harrell, Senior Program Officer for
Public Policy and Community Partnerships at Public/Private Ventures

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#### AGENDA

- 1:00 p.m. to 1:15 p.m. Getting Started: Introductions, Purpose of the Call, Call Logistics, *Dori Rutherford, Erica Sager & Sam Harrell*
- 1:15 p.m. to 1:45 p.m. How's it Goin'?: Grantee Progress/Challenges, Dori and Erica, DOL CFBCI
- 1:45 p.m. to 2:15 p.m. Hard Work on Soft Skills Six Strategies for Creating a Culture of Work, Presented by Sam Harrell, P/PV
- 2:15 p.m. to 2:45 p.m. Questions & Answers
  - 2:45 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. Closing remarks, next steps, Dori and Erica, DOL CFBCI



### Getting Started... 1:00 p.m. to 1:15 p.m.

#### How's it Going?

1:15 p.m. to 1:45 p.m.

Moderated by DOL CFBCI staff, this is an opportunity to discuss as a group your progress and challenges in meeting grant deliverables. It is also an opportunity to ask questions, gain clarity and express needs or concerns.

# Hard Work on Soft Skills Six Strategies for Creating a "Culture of Work"

1:45 p.m. to 2:15 p.m.

### First of all, what do we mean by "soft skills?"



When she concentrates, Susan K. can type at least 40 words a minute. She would probably be faster without the three inch finger nails. Her spelling is decent, and she can format a document in the major word-processing programs with basic commands like centered headings, indented text and boldface type. She knows the rudiments of Excel and Lotus 1-2-3: she can enter and sum a column of numbers, move the column elsewhere, and multiply the rows by those in another column. Susan K. is smart and more competent than many firsttime clerical workers.

The longest she has held a job is three weeks.

Few workforce development practitioners are fond of the phrase "soft skills." It is vague, it is mildly dismissive, a bit of a cliche'. But then they meet someone like Susan K. and try to describe why, with all her unquestionable "hard" skills, she is so frustrating to work with and employ. Suddenly the phrase and the distinction it embodies become almost inescapable.

Susan K. slouches in her chair, chews gum loudly, swears like a trucker at rush hour. She genuinely likes people and is known to go out of her way to be kind to neighbors, but she comes on so harshly that most people are frightened of her. She dislikes criticism and responds either with unprintable putdowns or icy sullenness. She has learned most of her office skills on her own ("when the teacher just leaves me alone so I can do my work").

It is no surprise to learn that Susan's background is grim. The details are heart-breaking. But for a workforce development program, especially in the high-pressure policy environment of "Work First," Susan is first and foremost a "soft-skills" challenge. Many employers are begging for her talents. But at this stage, no one can use them.

"We hire the smile," says a spokesperson for the hospitality industry. "We can train the skills." Increasingly, in an economy dominated by communication and teamwork - whether electronic or face to face – the "smile that employers say they want is really just shorthand for a cluster of personality traits, social graces, facility with language, and personal habits that many older working people take for granted and most find hard to list. Any such list would include a good deal more than just a smile - although the more cheerful virtues, such as friendliness and optimism, would surely rank high.



How does your organization equip persons with soft skills?

## Six Strategies for Creating a "Culture of Work"

From the Public/Private Ventures Working Ventures publication, Hard Work on Soft Skills: Creating a "Culture of Work" by Ted Houghton and Tony Proscio; October 2001, 56 pages. Order at www.ppv.org.

In the P/PV Working Ventures Publication, Hard Skills on Soft Skills, four organizations demonstrate different approaches to developing soft skills through creating a "culture of work." The organizations vary significantly, but each demonstrates one or more of a set of strategies that Working Ventures has found instrumental in creating a "culture of work." These strategies are:

### #1 Recreate the physical environment of work to the fullest extent possible.

Designing an authentic workplace, at least in part of the training area, helps participants gain experience of what work will feel like, and helps them adjust to and imagine themselves within settings and spaces that may be very unfamiliar. Simulation of the work environment includes the arrangement of the physical space as well as the organization's location, but it can also include norms within that space, such as expecting students to speak and behave as if they were in a real work place.

### #2 Establish the discipline of the workplace in all aspects of the program.

Constant attention to punctuality and dress, not just through lectures or discussions but through establishing the standards expected in the workplace, helps participants absorb and adapt to the norms of the workplace. Other requirements for success, such as clear communication, responding to criticism, handling pressure or using successful interviewing techniques, are fostered in low-risk environments during training to prepare participants for the high-stakes expectations of the workplace.

### #3 Give Participants lots of opportunities to get to know successful people.

The rapport participants develop with program staff can be crucial to their success. Fostering relationships with people other than the program staff is equally, if not more, important. Participants need to meet successful people of their own age and social background. Many programs develop a network of alumni who return to share their successes and struggles. Other programs create guestspeaker series in which local business people are introduced to students, helping them to demystify the image of the "boss." Meeting employers and alumni help participants develop confidence in relating to people who will soon be part of their own work life.

### #4 Create work-like tasks and establish teams to complete them.

The best way to learn about the world of work is to experience it. By creating work-like tasks and establishing teams to complete them, participants learn what is expected of employees and, ultimately, why it is expected. They can practice dealing with pressure, taking feedback, and negotiating with managers and colleagues. By working together in teams to get a job done, participants begin to understand the dynamics of a workplace.

### #5 Put trainees in the employer's role from time to time.

Experiencing the workplace through an employer's or manager's eyes can help participants understand the needs and constraints of their future employers. It helps them understand the world of work from a different perspective. When participants take on managerial roles, they begin to evaluate the skills of those around them and assess their own skills and work habits in a new light. It also gives them a chance to practice supervisory skills that are often critical to advancement.

### #6 Provide support services so trainees can focus on learning.

In order to be successful at work, participants must learn to manage their responsibilities outside of work. Helping participants develop the networks of support they need in order to show up at work regularly and on time is fundamental to their success. Ranging from child-care to counseling to health care, links to support services must be established during the training program so they can continue after employment. Participants also learn to be proactive – to seek support services before problems become acute.

### Questions & Answer Period 2:15 p.m. to 2:45 p.m.

(1) Where do you feel your program is strong in this approach.

(2) Where do you feel you need work?

(3) What are some ideas you have that can be implemented in your organization?

#### P/PV Working Ventures

Working Ventures taps the wisdom of seasoned programs and professionals to improve performance in the workforce development field. We seek to strengthen direct service providers' knowledge of effective strategies and increase organizations' capacities to implement these strategies.

#### Closing Remarks & Next Steps

2:45 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Dori Rutherford and Erica Sager